

WASHINGTON POST
4 February 1987

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Iran Calls U.S. Journalist a Spy; Report Says He May Be Released

By Richard Homan
Washington Post Foreign Service

Iran acknowledged yesterday that it is holding Wall Street Journal reporter **Gerald F. Seib**, calling him a "spy for the Zionist regime," but the brief radio dispatch gave no indication what Iran intends to do with him.

An unconfirmed account by an independent U.S.-based news service, however, quoted what it called a reliable Iranian government source as saying that Seib, who was taken into custody Saturday, would be released unconditionally within 48 hours.

U.S. officials said they had no confirmation of the report by the South-North News Service, which is based in Hanover, N.H., and covers Third World developments.

White House and State Department spokesmen said that the Swiss Embassy in Tehran, which has handled U.S. interests since diplomatic relations were broken in 1979, had been denied access to Seib and had been unable to get an appointment with Iranian officials to discuss the case.

"We don't have anyone who has talked to him or seen him," White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said, adding that U.S. officials had no indication that Seib was "anything other than a reporter covering the Iran-Iraq war."

Fitzwater and State Department spokesman Charles Redman repeated earlier statements that the United States considers Seib's arrest "unwarranted" and demands his release.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, said, "We hope it was a mistake and it will be rectified shortly," Reuter reported. Shultz said that the United States was "expressing our views to the government of Iran, to the Swiss and making our views known

through other governments and sources of contact" to have Seib freed.

Tehran radio, in a one-sentence statement that was Iran's first acknowledgment of Seib's arrest, said yesterday that "the U.S. officially asked for the release of Gerald Seib, the spy of the Zionist regime who had come to Tehran disguised as a reporter," Reuter reported from Tehran. Iran refers to Israel as the Zionist regime.

Reuter quoted an unnamed Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that Seib carried an American passport "but intelligence authorities say it is forged."

In an apparent attempt to counter Iran's contention that Seib was a "Zionist spy," the reporter's family in Hays, Kan., pointed to his German Catholic background, United Press International reported.

"We want to stress his Catholic background, his German Volga background, his ethnic background," Richard Seib, a printer who works for the Hays Daily News, told UPI. "His upbringing did not have anything to do with the type of person who would spy for anybody."

The South-North News Service account, written by Fereydon Pezeshkan, who was identified as an Iranian journalist who works in Tehran for a Japanese newspaper, said the report that Seib would be released came from a "reliable high-level source in the Iranian ministry of intelligence."

Iran is not known to have a "ministry of intelligence," but Richard Dudman, who heads the South-North News Service, said Pezeshkan stood by this description of his source.

On Monday, the same service had quoted a "reliable source" in that ministry as saying that Seib had gathered intelligence information too sensitive to be allowed to leave the country, and adding that "it is considered certain that a trial will be held."

According to the news service's account yesterday, the unidentified Iranian official gave no explanation for the reported decision to free Seib but said that "mistakes and misunderstandings played a major role" in his detention.

The source also was quoted as saying that "the humble approaches of the White House, the State Department and officials of [The Wall Street Journal] were unprecedented and paved the way" for the reported decision to release Seib.

While the United States has demanded Seib's release, the statements have been kept low-key, apparently in an attempt to avoid an acrimonious exchange of charges with Tehran that might make this more difficult.

Seib, 30, who has worked for the Journal since 1978, has been based in Cairo, covering the Middle East, since 1985. He was invited to Iran by the government, along with more than 50 U.S. and other western reporters, to cover the war between Iran and Iraq.

After spending 10 days in Iran, he was detained while the other foreign journalists were directed to leave.